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cold war

The term cold war refers to the strategic and political struggle that developed after World War II between the United States and its Western European allies, on one hand, and the USSR and Communist countries, on the other. The expression was coined by the American journalist Herbert Bayard Swope in a 1947 speech he wrote for financier Bernard Baruch.

The cold war initially centered on the use of USSR military forces to install Communist governments in Eastern Europe. These Soviet actions ran counter to the U.S. government's insistence upon the right of self-determination for the peoples of Eastern Europe and raised fears that the USSR, after gaining control of Eastern Europe, would try to communize Western Europe. The USSR had suffered enormous losses in the war against Nazi Germany and looked upon Eastern Europe as a bulwark against another invasion from the West. The Soviet leaders considered U.S. objections to Soviet actions in Poland, Hungary, and Romania a betrayal of wartime understandings about spheres of influence in Europe. Thus they placed Eastern Europe behind a military and political barrier known in the West as the IRON CURTAIN.

Political differences were exacerbated by ideological conflict. The Marxist-Leninist Soviet leaders believed that capitalism would inevitably seek the destruction of the Soviet system. In the United States, a long-standing suspicion and dislike of communism strengthened the view that the USSR was intent on expansion and world conquest.

The Struggle over Germany

Meanwhile, competition began for control of Germany and other strategic points such as the Dardanelles, the straits linking the Black Sea with the Aegean and the Mediterranean. Soviet pressures on Greece and Turkey led President Harry TRUMAN to declare in March 1947 that the United States would give economic and military aid to those countries and would also "support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures."

The announcement in June 1947 of the U.S. MARSHALL PLAN to restore the faltering economies of Western Europe—including that of West Germany—prompted a series of ripostes from the Kremlin.

In February 1948 the democratic government of Czechoslovakia was overturned by a Communist coup; in May 1948 Soviet authorities severed all Western land-access routes to BERLIN. Only the success of air cargo planes in supplying West Berlin, isolated within the Soviet zone of occupation that later became East Germany, permitted the United States to resist the Soviet pressure.

In 1949 the Western powers entered into a military agreement that led to the formation of the NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION (NATO), designed to establish a military counterweight to the Soviet forces in Europe. Meanwhile, in China, a long civil war ended with the victory of Communist forces under Mao Tse-tung in 1949.

War in Korea

The first phase of the cold war culminated in the North Korean invasion of South Korea on June 26, 1950, resulting in U.S. involvement in a land war in Asia (see KOREAN WAR).

The initial reverses of the Western forces, the subsequent introduction of Chinese troops into the conflict on the side of North Korea, and the inability of the Truman administration to bring the war to an end froze American public opinion in a state of hostility that made normal relations with any Communist government impossible.

Competing Strategies

To meet these challenges, each side fashioned a strategy. The U.S. strategy was called "containment," a term first used by the U.S. diplomat and Soviet expert George KENNAN in arguing that Soviet expansionism might be contained by a strategy of responding to Soviet pressures and probes wherever they occurred. Kennan's thesis was strongly supported by Secretary of State Dean ACHESON, who called for increased military power for NATO. This policy appeared to the USSR as one more Western effort to isolate and undermine the Soviet system. The Kremlin adopted a strategy of retaliation against U.S. containment.

During the 1950s, Washington's policy was shaped by the more militant John Foster DULLES. The United States

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sought to anticipate and prevent further Communist gains by maintaining overwhelming military superiority, by forming new alliances in Asia (the SOUTHEAST ASIA TREATY ORGANIZATION) and in the Middle East (the CENTRAL TREATY ORGANIZATION), and by extending economic and military assistance to any country thought to be in danger of attack or subversion by Communist forces.

Relations between the two powers improved somewhat following the death of Joseph STALIN in 1953. The wars in Korea and French Indochina were brought to an end, and the first postwar summit meeting of Soviet and Western leaders was held in Geneva in July 1955. But no more than a surface thaw was achieved. After the consolidation of power by Nikita KHRUSHCHEV in 1956, the USSR embarked on two new strategies. The first involved economic and military competition with the United States for influence with Arab and Third World countries such as Ghana, Egypt, India, and Indonesia. This strategy evolved into Soviet support for colonial revolutions, or "wars of national liberation," and for left-wing governments in Guatemala and Cuba. The second strategy, based upon Soviet development of intercontinental ballistic missiles, was to divide the Western powers by renewing Soviet pressure to eject the West from Berlin. In 1955 the WARSAW TREATY ORGANIZATION was established as a response to the rearming of West Germany. A new round of Soviet-American confrontations ensued, all the riskier because now both sides possessed nuclear weapons. The risks were underscored by the Berlin crisis of 1961 and by the CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS of 1962.

Detente

The Nuclear Test Ban Treaty of 1963 was a turning point in the cold war. The treaty was accorded considerable symbolic significance on both sides and seemed to signify that U.S. and Soviet leaders wanted to end a costly and risky struggle that increased the danger of a real war.

Nevertheless, ideological rivalry, competition for influence, and the arms race continued between the two superpowers. U.S. involvement in the VIETNAM WAR, for example, was at its height during the late 1960s. East and West were able, however, to negotiate in a spirit of DETENTE. U.S. rapprochement with China occurred in the 1970s, and the arms race was slowed by the Strategic Arms Limitation (SALT) agreements of 1972 and 1974. (See ARMS CONTROL.)

Estrangement and Reconciliation

Relations between the United States and the USSR deteriorated during the administration (1977-81) of U.S. president Jimmy Carter, especially after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. This revival of the cold war continued in the early years of the Reagan administration, fueled by Soviet support for the Sandinista government of Nicaragua and by America's declared intention to develop an antinuclear STRATEGIC DEFENSE INITIATIVE. With the rise to power of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985, however, the situation began to change dramatically. Gorbachev's policies of domestic reform and reconciliation with the West led to self-determination for the satellite countries of Eastern Europe and, in 1991—however inadvertently—the end of the Soviet system itself, which finally brought the cold war to an end.

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